

Thy Kingdom Come, On Earth
First Presbyterian Church, Lake Forest
October 6, 2015

We pray at least every Sunday for the Kingdom of God to come on earth. It is the first petition in the prayer Christians share and pray together when they worship.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done
On earth, as it is heaven.

In his book, *Daring Prayer*, David Willis wrote:

"We are taught to pray "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done." Inherent in this short petition are the most powerful expectations which have motivated disciples from the first century to the present. And inherent in this petition are perhaps the most controversial, difficult questions facing anyone who attempts to follow in his or her own way what Jesus taught.

It means that we renew our confidence that the future ultimately belongs to God who intervenes in the affairs of men and women, reordering them, according to God's purposes. It means that we make a commitment to align ourselves with those purposes and to share in their unfolding."

It was the heart of Jesus' message: Good news of the Kingdom, a Kingdom, he said which is always coming, but also a Kingdom which is already here, in your midst, within the life you are living now, both here, but not yet here.

Apparently the disciples weren't sure what he meant and asked him for clarification. And in Matthew 13 he offers a series of definitions, some of them enigmatic, in parables, or short stories.

-The Kingdom is like someone who sowed good seed in his field, but an enemy came during the night and sowed weeds among the wheat.

- The Kingdom is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds which becomes a great tree.

-The Kingdom is like yeast, like treasure hidden in a field, a pearl of great price, a fish net thrown into the sea.

The common theme in all of these is that the Kingdom of God is not somewhere else — but here, in the life of the world, in the life we are all living and it is very definitely unlike any Kingdom anyone has ever heard of.

There are lovely images of the promised Kingdom in Hebrew scripture:

- "A child shall be born, a son given. His authority shall grow continually and there shall be endless peace." (Isaiah 9: 6, 7)

- "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid." (Isaiah 11:6)

- "The wilderness shall rejoice and blossom, the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the lame shall leap like a deer." (Isaiah 35: 5,6)

Other images have clear ethical and political implications:

- "Let Justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." (Amos 5:24)

- "For I am creating a new heaven and a new earth,
No more shall there be an infant who lives but a few days,
Or an old person who does not live out a lifetime....
They shall build houses and live in them...

They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They shall not build and another inhabit. They shall not plant and another eat." (Isaiah 65)

In Jesus' day the Pharisees notion of the Kingdom was a nation morally and spiritually renewed by strict adherence to the Law of Moses, the Torah. The Kingdom is like everyone obeying the law, keeping all the ordinances and attending the festivals and feast days. On the other hand an underground guerrilla group, the Zealots, were committed to the nation's independence and freedom believed the Kingdom of God would come when the Messiah appeared and restored the old monarchy of David, sat on the royal throne, drove the Romans into the sea and reigned, once again, over the land and the people. That's the easiest image of the kingdom to understand, the one that inspires and stirs the blood. In Jesus day it meant revolution and a war to end Roman occupation..

Jesus got in trouble because he rejected both of those popular definitions of the Kingdom. What does it mean to pray Thy Kingdom Come on Earth?

Church Historian Roberta Bondi says her first idea of the Kingdom of God coming into the world was entirely negative. She remembers vacation trips as a child to visit extended family in rural Kentucky, sitting in the back seat and reading signs painted on the sides of barns.

"The Kingdom of God is coming. Prepare to meet thy God,"

"Are you ready to stand before the judgement seat?"

At age nine, Roberta says she was pretty sure she wasn't at all ready to meet God. What she was sure of was that God's Kingdom, God's coming was something to worry about. She was terrified of the possibility that the Kingdom of God might come."

I recall the same experience: fundamentalists neighbors praying for Jesus to come and gather all his people, the Baptists,

and take every one away from the world to heaven. I didn't want to go. I really like it here.

On a rural highway in N. Carolina, from Rt. 17 to the Ocean, a road we have driven every year since 1976, we wait to see "The Sign". "Jesus is Coming. Get Right with God - Today." Sure enough, there it was last July. It's quite faded now. You can barely see the letters and read the warning. "There it is" I said. "It's still there." And Sue, my theological advisor, said, "If Jesus doesn't come pretty soon they're going to have to repaint that sign."

For Jesus, God's Kingdom, the Kingdom of heaven - he used the phrases interchangeably- was not a place, not an earthly realm. It is a condition, a state of being. Jesus rejected the idea that the Kingdom could be forced by military and political power, some of his disciples wanted to see that happen, Jesus totally rejected it - a lesson his followers have been slow to learn, from the first century Zealots to the Holy Roman Empire to the Crusades all the way to Mike Huckabee, and many all the relentless attempts in between to establish a Christian America by law. Jesus would have none of it.

John Dominic Crossan, a distinguished Catholic New Testament scholar, says that according to Jesus the Kingdom is not a place but "people living under divine rule. The Kingdom of God," Crossan says, "is what the world would be if God were immediately and directly in charge." [Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, p55]

Just as there have always been attempts to install the Kingdom of God on earth by political and military power, so there have always been attempts by going the opposite direction, by withdrawing from the world. Not long after Jesus, in the second and third centuries C.E., some Christians in Palestine, Asia Minor, and Egypt despaired of ever being able to live as faithful followers of Jesus in the messiness and violence and moral corruption of the world and decided that the only possible way to follow Jesus faithfully was to withdraw entirely from the world. Some went into the desert and lived like hermits, in caves for the rest of their lives, living off the land and the charity of others. They are important for having introduced the idea of mysticism to early Christianity, a life of total obedience to Jesus Christ in meditation, self contemplation and prayer. We know a bit about them and some of their writings survive. We call them the Desert Fathers and Mothers. One of them, Simon Stylites, lived on top of a high pole in the desert. Not long after, groups of like-minded men and women gathered in communities, apart from the world and lived lives of faithfulness in community, totally isolated from society. They were called monasteries and the idea was that you simply could not be a completely committed follower of Jesus and deal

with work and marriage and children and families, greed and moral compromise, money, violence and sex, above all sex. i.e. human life in the world.

In the early years up into the Middle Ages, when life in the world was harsh and difficult and short, the Monastic idea had great appeal and thousands of people flocked to monasteries, electing to express their faith without the distractions and messiness of life. As the Roman Church grew stronger and more elaborate with classes of clergy, ceremony, ritual, and endless obligations, the monks were a living reminder that following Jesus required simplicity and a degree of devotion which at times is in conflict with the requirements of life in a society. The richer and more powerful the church became the more important monasticism was. Monastic Rules were developed for life in community: all of life was structured with assigned times for sleeping, eating, working and praying. The Rule of Benedict, written by the founder of the Benedictine Order between 530 and 560, gives us a look at what life was like in the monasteries. The monks worshipped and prayed together at times throughout the day: Part of the mission and responsibility of the monks and sisters was to do the praying for the rest of the church and for people too busy to devote large chunks of life to prayer. The monasteries tried to be self supporting as much as possible by agriculture, farming, raising cattle and chickens, and developing products that might be sold for income: the produce that was not used by the monastery kitchen: honey, bread, wine and beer, for instance. In time some monasteries became famous for the quality of their products. Thomas Merton's Trappist Monastery in Kentucky makes marvelous fruit cakes with a generous share of Kentucky bourbon baked in that are quite delicious.

The heart of the monastery, in addition to the chapel, was the library where monks read and studied scripture and a "Scriptorium" where monks laboriously copied scripture and other ancient texts. After Rome fell and the Tribes of Northern Europe and Scandinavia pretty much destroyed everything of civilization - the time we sometimes refer to as the Dark Ages (current historians tell us that the Dark Ages weren't all that dark and the term is mostly not used) the Monasteries copied and protected and preserved precious ancient texts, Greek and Roman philosophy, poetry and drama along with scripture.

Monasticism grew rapidly through the Middle Ages. Some monasteries became large and prosperous and wealthy. In addition to preserving ancient, irreplaceable texts, monasticism gave the world the gift of Gregorian chant, a style of unison

singing developed in the early monasteries. It has experienced a modern renaissance with recordings of monks chanting near the top of the charts. And as they copied scripture the monks developed a unique artistic expression called Ornamentation. Drawings of flowers and birds and intricate designs were added to the columns of the text. The first letter of the first paragraph was colorfully and elaborately ornamented. The result was a new kind of beauty. The Book of Kells, around 800 C.E., copied and ornamented by Irish monks, perhaps at the community on the island of Iona, can be seen in the library of Trinity College, Dublin in a glass case. It is gorgeous, colorful, with intricate Celtic knots, mythical beasts. A new page of the ornamented scripture is turned every day.

The larger monasteries built huge buildings. One of the most famous was the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Casino in Italy, originally established by Benedict the Abbey church in 1066, sacked by Napoleon in 1799. As Allies advanced up the Italian Peninsula in 1944, they encountered Monte Casino, part of German Gustav line – assumed that Monte Casino was fortified and reluctantly bombarded much of it. As it turned out, no Germans – 230 Italian civilians killed and artistic treasures destroyed, irony and tragedy of war. Monte Casino was rebuilt and re dedicated in 1964.

The monastic movement is still alive and very much with us. Religious communities continue to play a role in modern Christianity, not only in ongoing communities of prayer and contemplation, but increasingly as retreat centers where lay persons can experience a slice of monastic living apart from the world.

There also have been Christians, monastics, who believe that the faithful life not only can but must be lived at least partially in the world. Francis of Assisi and his follower and friend, Clare, founded Orders of Friars and Sisters to live both in community but also in the world, imitating Christ by living simply, without anything by way of worldly accouterments and distractions, wearing only a brown robe cinched at the waist with a rope, still the identifying dress of the Franciscans, and giving themselves totally to both service to the poor but also preaching the gospel. "Preach the Gospel" Francis taught his brothers. "When necessary use words." Francis was remarkable. The Papacy looked askance at his behavior and his movement at first. It seemed like a serious threat to the status quo. He was summoned to Rome for a private conversation with the Pope and only later did his new order of Franciscans receive papal approval and blessing. His friend and follower Clare of Assisi founded her own order, The Poor Sisters of Clare, still noted for compassionate, charitable work with the poor

throughout the world. In his commitment to peace and peacemaking, Francis somehow, in the middle of the Crusades, made his way to the encampment of the Muslim forces and met with the Sultan - who was very impressed with him. Francis was invited to remain for a few days of more conversations. He returned to the Christian side and the war resumed. I am reminded of all of that as I watch a modern Franciscan, Pope Francis in action.

Francis and the Franciscans live in the world but at arm's length from the world. But there have always been yet others who insisted that the Kingdom is, as Jesus repeatedly said, present in the common, everyday stuff and relationships and messiness of human life: at work, at play, in friendships and intimate relationships, in marriage and parenting and family and human worldly community and that it is there, not in isolation that most followers are called to do their following.

But exactly how to do that? Augustine addressed himself to the question. Augustine of Hippo, Saint Augustine, was a bishop in North Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries, was a brilliant, classical scholar and theologian schooled in Greek philosophy. His personal reflections on his conversion and life of faith, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, remains a Christian classic and must reading. Augustine, observing the decline of the Roman Empire and the possible end of stability and security, proposed a way to be a Christian in the world. There are two realms, Augustine argued. He called them *The City of God* and *The City of Man*. They coexist. They are both here and now but distinct and separate. Sometimes you live in the City of God and at other times, most of the time actually, you live in the City of Man. Augustine is hugely important in Christian history and thought and this brief mention doesn't begin to do him justice. But he did articulate the idea, still very much with us, that we live and follow Christ in two separate spheres or realms of life: the spiritual and the worldly. They do not overlap. They are separate and distinct. What you do in one sphere stays there and is not necessarily related to what you do in the other sphere.

Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk and Augustine's *Two Cities* is what Luther essentially believed and taught. You can live life thoroughly in the world, doing what you have to do and then you can move into the spiritual realm. It does solve a problem, but there is a serious critique. Some historians think the Augustinian-Lutheran "*Two Cities*" idea has within it a disconnect, a false dichotomy, and creates the potential, at least, of participation in evil: so long as you are faithful in the spiritual realm. What happens in one realm doesn't have anything to do with what's going on in the other. Now modern Lutheranism does not hold

tightly to that idea any more than modern Presbyterians advocate Calvin's Double Predestination. But some historians, William Shirer, the author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, is one of them, suggest that the Lutheran idea of Two Cities, deep in the German soul, was part of the fertile cultural seed bed that allowed Naziism to emerge and thrive. The ghastly symbol of it is the S.S. Officers, supervising and administering the death camps during the week and then going to church with their families on Sunday morning. In a documentary on Dietrich Bonhoeffer there is a photograph taken at a Nazi rally and there on the platform, with Adolf Hitler and Herman Goering, surrounded by swastikas, are two Lutheran Bishops in clerical collars, their arms outstretched in the Nazi salute. There were many, many German Lutherans who resisted and died for their courage, and, again, there is no way does modern Lutheranism continue to teach the two realms.

John Calvin agreed with Luther on many points of doctrine but not on this. For Calvin, there were not two realms - just one, and Christians are called to live faithfully and thoroughly in the world but as citizens of God's kingdom. That Kingdom is always present in the world. And so eventually Calvinism becomes social, economic and political. In Geneva, where he was invited to lead the new Reformed Church he began immediately to preach and press for civic improvements. The Gospel, Calvin taught, was for the Town Hall and the Town Marketplace as well as the town churches. And so he dove in and advocated for fairness in the market and accurate balanced scales for weighing and selling produce. And he argued for fair labor practices and restrictions on the use of children as laborers. He proposed public schools to educate all the children of Geneva and organized welfare service to welcome and house and feed refugees fleeing religious persecution. He even had something to say about the Geneva sewerage disposal system.

It is the distinct characteristic of theological Calvinism that it is interested in and involved in how life is being lived in the world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, bothered by anti-semitism and the eventual German Church's complete capitulation to the Third Reich, Bonhoeffer was greatly influenced by the distinguished Reformed theologian, Karl Barth and, at Union Seminary in New York, by Reformed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Bonhoeffer advocated what he called "Worldly Christianity" and his life is an eloquent example of what he meant. He was living and studying at Union Seminary in New York City as the Nazis tightened their grip on Germany and German culture and began to persecute Jews and repress dissent of any kind. Bonhoeffer decided that he must return home to share in what was happening to his people and his nation. Niebuhr and others pled with him to remain in the safety

and security of the United States, pursuing his studies, teaching and enjoying his growing reputation as a promising young theologian. But Bonhoeffer's faith, that Christ calls us to deep love for and involvement in the world, kept pulling him away from the safety of New York and back to his people and the world they were now living in. Niebuhr did everything he could think of to convince Bonhoeffer to stay. Bonhoeffer listened to his heart and boarded one of the last ships to sail from New York to Germany. When he saw how the German Church, now virtually coopted by the Third Reich, a Government Department, remained silent in the face of increasing persecution of Jews and other atrocities Bonhoeffer dropped out and with friends and like-minded German clergy and laity formed an alternative - He called it The German Confessing Church. He started a seminary to train pastors to minister and witness in the new difficult political climate. The Nazis shut it down when they discovered what was going on. Bonhoeffer helped author a unique confession of faith, the Barmen Confession, now part of our Presbyterian Book of Confessions, that declares that there is no ultimate authority but Jesus Christ, that Christ is the Lord of human conscience, no political authority, no leader, dictator, Fuhrer. Christ alone is Lord. Finally Bonhoeffer became convinced that Nazism constituted a fatal threat to authentic Christian Faith and an authentic church, as well as threatening everything that was good and creative and kind about classical German culture and that as a Christian he must do everything he could, everything necessary to resist. He joined a small group of government insiders who also understood the threat Nazism posed and planned to assassinate Adolf Hitler by planting a bomb under a conference table where Hitler would be conducting a briefing. The bomb exploded but Hitler was unharmed. The conspirators were identified, rounded up and jailed. For several years Bonhoeffer was in a series of Nazi prisons. His correspondence with his parent and friends, essays and a few poems were collected and published posthumously and are a theological classic: Letters and Papers from Prison. On the day before the German surrender and the end of the war in Europe the Nazis executed Bonhoeffer. "When Christ calls a man" Bonhoeffer had written, "he calls him come and die".

Worldly Christianity.

The majority of early settlers of North America were Calvinists from Scotland, Northern Ireland, Holland and the Low Countries. French Huguenots and English Puritans. They brought their churches with them and by the mid-18th century the largest religious group in the colonies was Presbyterian. Presbyterians and Congregationalist and English Puritans planted congregations all over the colonies. There are Presbyterian Churches in

Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey and Pennsylvania that predate the War for Independence by nearly a century.

One of the early Presbyterian ministers, Francis Makemie, from Northern Ireland got himself arrested in 1706 by the governor of New York, Lord Cornbury, for preaching without a license. Licenses were granted only to Church of England clergy. Makemie argued for freedom of religion and a British criminal court acquitted him. Our forbearers were Calvinists. They believed that the church must live thoroughly in the world and that the civil authority, the government had no authority thoroughly over the life and activities and mission of the church in the world.

John Calvin's influence was huge in the New World. The Founders of our nation were a mixed bunch: Anglican, Puritan Congregationalists, Unitarians, Diests, and Presbyterians but they thought like Calvinists. Religion—religion and religious practice—would be free here. There will be no state sponsored church and no religious test for political office. In the Declaration the members of the Continental Congress lined up and signed in Philadelphia in the first hot, humid week of July 1776. They made a remarkable theological affirmation deeply rooted in Calvinist thinking.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creation with certain inalienable rights...that to secure these rights governments are instituted by men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

One of the basic tenants of Calvin's thinking was the ancient Hebrew assumption that human beings are created in the image of God, are blessed with autonomy, value, worth, dignity and the freedom to determine who will exercise authority in both church and society. Humans are free religiously and politically. Human conscience is inviolable, sacred: no one, certainly no state, can violate, invade or determine it. No government can determine ultimate allegiance, obedience—that belongs to God, Calvinists maintained that "God alone is Lord of the conscience," and no church, no church official, no government, no government official or agency can command an ultimate loyalty that belongs to God alone. And so Calvinists have always argued for the freedom to dissent, particularly when dissent is not popular.

And always, always Calvinists have been expressing their faith thoroughly in the world, always commenting on this as that secular matter: always advocating for principles, always contending and arguing with one another. It's not new. That is who we are. John Mulder, former president of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, says Presbyterians think that everything that happens in the world is their business. When the first General

Assembly of the Presbyterian Church met in 1787 in Philadelphia, when, by the way, the new Congress—or Confederation of states as it was called—was meeting to write a Constitution—one of the first things they did was address themselves to George Washington.

The world is our business. And our constant commitment on becoming involved in worldly matters, has horrified other people of faith and, often enough, by our own members.

They are, of course, churches that do not share our commitment to the world and that teach that Christian life is primarily an internal matter, a matter of the spirit. There are hugely popular churches and movements that believe Christians are called to withdraw from the world and in their piety to keep themselves untouched by the messy, sometimes sordidness of life. Not us. Like Calvin, inserting himself in the name of his Lord, in the social and political life of 16th Geneva, Presbyterians today, study and take position and become involved in racial justice, economic justice, business and management and labor, environmental justice and we do it, not because we are partial to one political party or the other, but because we believe that the world is where Christ calls us to be and to follow him.

One of the primary ways Presbyterians have been worldly has been through education. Our conviction that every individual bears the image of the Creator, is gloriously free and has the same opportunity as any other individual has led our church into education. Christians must be able to read, read scripture, the Reformers argued. John Knox virtually invented public education, and Scotland consequently had one of the world's first systems of universal state sponsored education. Public schools are our idea, one of the first things a Colonial Presbytery minister did after organizing a church was to start a school, in a small building beside a church, often serving as the teacher. The vast majority of early colleges and universities were established by Presbyterians and about 70 of them continue to be related to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Another important component of our commitment to the world is in our unique idea of vocation, or calling,—which is what vocation, from the Latin 'vocatus,' means. Until the Reformation a calling, a vocation, was what clergy had. God calls some men into the priesthood or a monastery and women to a convent. They have a vocation. Apparently God leaves everyone else alone to figure out what to do, how to earn a living and live a life. Before the Reformation there were two distinct tiers and classes in the church: clergy and laity. Clergy have calling, laity do not. Clergy live apart from the rest of the population. Dress differently, use different language—a language, by the way, only they understand,

and finally clergy live apart from the basic human enterprise—marriage, and children and family.

Martin Luther did not agree and came up with a remarkable idea. Everyone has a vocation, a calling in the world. God needs and calls cooks, carpenters, plumbers and ditch diggers, homemakers and physicists, police and attorneys and doctors, teachers and politicians. It was a truly revolutionary idea and undercut the entire neat, two-tier system of the Roman Catholic Church and also elevated and celebrated everyone, the people.

Of course, the old two-tier system is still very much with us. People still want to believe that clergy have a call, that God calls us but ignores everyone else. It emerges in all sorts of settings. When we are asked, and people ask us a lot, how we got into this business, they expect, I think, that we all had a unique religious experience: a voice in the middle of the night, telling us to drop what we are doing and enroll in McCormick Seminary. I suppose it is that way for some, the very fortunate some.

Most of us struggle with vocation as much as anyone else. Most of us feel drawn—on the basis of what we love, and what we love doing. God, I have come to believe, calls us through our interests and skills and most of all our passion. I think Frederick Buechner got it exactly right when he wrote, “Your vocation is where the world’s deep need and your great happiness meet.” (Check it out!)

Our Father, who art in Heaven
Hallowed by Thy name
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done,
On Earth, as it is in Heaven

On earth. The only fear Jesus had about the Kingdom of God coming to earth is that we would miss it. We’ll fail to see it when it appears. Apparently it won’t always hit us in the face—a clear unmistakable appearance of the Kingdom—and so we might miss it, might neglect to hurry to become part of it. We might fail to give our heart and time and resources—our lives—to it. So he keeps reminding us. It will be a surprise. It will come in unlikely places and at unlikely times. Wait for it. Watch for it. So where and when does it come? Where and when have you seen it?

It comes, I believe, when the people of God, the church, acts like Jesus did, and does the things he did. The Kingdom of Heaven comes when the church is courageous and willing to risk in order to love; when the church is as radically loving and inclusive as he was when he invited that motley crowd of outsiders, marginalized rejects to sit down at the table with him.

I believe that the Kingdom of God appears when the children are blessed and affirmed and protected and loved and treated as the priority that they were for Jesus.

I believe the Kingdom of God comes when reconciliation and forgiveness are offered and peace happens.

The Kingdom appears whenever and wherever the love of God breaks through.

We saw, I think, a beautiful, eloquent picture of the Kingdom two weeks ago when Pope Francis stood with his back to the foundation of the destroyed World Trade Center, with representatives of the world's religions. They were all there—Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Orthodox, Christian. The Pope reached across centuries of exclusivism, persecution, torture and tragic warfare and said the most remarkable thing. He said God respects them all and listens to them and blesses—and needs—them all.

And then, with that in the background, a choir of beautiful young people of all races and colors and religions, a gorgeous kaleidoscope of the diversity that is American culture, and the world, sang: "Let There be Peace on Earth and Let it Begin with Me..."

Thy Kingdom come on earth. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.